

# MAKING KNOWLEDGE OUT OF SOUND

The Stop Smiling interview with Ornette Coleman

BY JC GABEL

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Ornette Coleman is the last of four great 20th century jazz innovators to change the face of music forever. All four can be identified on a first-name basis, or by a nickname: Satchmo, Bird, Miles and Ornette. But Coleman is the only one who is living and working today.

Born March 9th, 1930 in Fort Worth, Texas, Ornette's father died when he was very young, as did his sister Vera and older brother Allen. His mother, Rosa, raised him and his other sister, Truvenza "Trudy" Coleman Leach (who is a musician and singer herself), as best she could.

On an inspirational trip to New York to visit his cousin when he was 15, his cousin's husband, trumpeter Doc Cheatham, introduced him to Walter "Foots" Thomas, a former Cab Calloway sideman and jazz teacher. "Thomas had me look into the mirror and play for an hour," Ornette told John Litweiler in an interview for his 1992 biography, *Ornette Coleman: A Harmolodic Life*. "That was my first lesson." He was a fast learner and, it turned out, a natural improviser.

His mother was supportive, but never truly grasped her son's talent; in fact, she only saw him perform once — in the mid-Sixties. She told him that if he wanted to learn the saxophone, he could work and save for one — and that's just what he did. Ornette worked odd jobs (busing tables, shining shoes, scraping paint) for what felt like an eternity, and then one day found a Conn-brand plastic alto saxophone under his bed. He proceeded to teach himself the instrument right then and there, and the rest is history.







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...Imagine how many different races make up America. If you do that, you can imagine what the music must be like. It must be incredible, and it is. It's the heart and soul and the mind.

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In the late Forties, all the aspiring young musicians in Texas admired tenor sax man Thomas “Red” Connors. For a short time, as a teenager, Ornette also played tenor. When he entered high school, he befriended fellow Texans Dewey Redman and Charles Moffett, and they started playing live music together. (Decades later, they would play on some of Ornette’s most influential albums.) At the time, he and his friends had formed a band called the Jam Jivers that played at high school assemblies and dances. After a while, they were pulling down \$100 a week, a middle-class salary back then.

Toward the end of his high school years, Ornette knew that if he wanted to make it as a musician, he’d have to leave the segregated South. By 19, he was touring around the Southern states in rhythm and blues groups, and eventually got stranded in Los Angeles with Pee Wee Crayton’s band in 1952, only to return to Texas a few months later, broke and struggling.

In 1954 he moved to LA, but still did not seem to fit in there either. His friends dubbed him the “Black Jesus” because he grew his beard and hair long and dressed in eccentric clothes. He eventually found a job — first as a stock boy and then as an elevator operator — at Bullock’s department store on Wilshire Boulevard. (He of course had to cut his hair and beard.) When work was slow, he would take the lift to the top floor, turn it off, and read up on music theory about harmonies.

After several years of struggling to find musicians to practice or play gigs with, he finally landed a record contract with the Contemporary Jazz label in Los Angeles. To most, Ornette’s debut, *Something Else!!!!*, was nothing if not a revelation. Fellow

musicians, critics and jazz music fans had truly thought he could not play. Nat Hentoff, the respected jazz writer, critic and social commentator, summed up his approach to music in the liner notes to *Something Else!!!!*: “Ornette’s concern with pitch is part of the dominant characteristic of his work — his conviction that the way the line is going and the pitches in which the notes of the line are played should primarily determine the harmonic progressions. He is not too far, in this broad sense, from certain contemporary classical composers who, rather than start a piece with a fixed tonality, prefer to let the melody lines create the harmonies.”

Four years after arriving in LA, Ornette’s stunning, original sound — played on a plastic alto saxophone that many thought sounded out of tune — turned the jazz community upside down. It was the first time that had happened in the 15 years since Charlie Parker arrived in Harlem. “If Ornette’s phrasing gives a first impression of spaciousness, like the wide open spaces in Texas,” Litweiler writes in his book, “that impression is partly an illusion, for the broken phrases of bebop are reflected in his phrase shapes.” For Ornette, improvisation was the key. Yet his compositions are rooted in the blues, and he rarely played pop standards of the day.<sup>1</sup>

John Lewis, the pianist from the Modern Jazz Quartet, encouraged Ornette to push new boundaries, and helped land him a larger record contract with Atlantic Records in 1959, resulting in his major label debut, the prophetically titled *The Shape of Jazz to Come*. Soon after, Ornette left LA for a string of shows at the Five Spot in New York City. Needless to say, not everyone was pleased to have him in the Big Apple. Miles Davis, who







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L-R Ornette Coleman, David Izenzon, Charles Moffett

was on top of the jazz world at the time — having recently released *Kind of Blue* — appreciated Ornette's improvisations, but thought he was “screwed up inside,” while Max Roach, the legendary bebop drummer, was so outraged by what he heard, he punched him out one night during his now infamous run at the Five Spot in 1959.

After settling in New York permanently, Ornette formed a piano-less quartet with Don Cherry on trumpet, Charlie Haden or Scott La Faro on bass, and either Billy Higgins or Ed Blackwell on drums. These session players would stick with him for the next couple of years, recording some of the most influential jazz records of his career, including *Change of the Century*, *This Is Our Music*,<sup>2</sup> *Free Jazz* (with the addition of Eric Dolphy and Freddie Hubbard) and *Ornette!*.

Also around this time, Gunther Schuller, the jazz composer and French horn player, met with Ornette, who was fast becoming the face of free jazz on the East Coast. “The most outstanding element in Ornette’s musical conception is an utter and complete freedom,” he said to Martin Williams in an interview for the liner notes of his first Atlantic album. “His musical inspiration operates in a world uncluttered by conventional ways of blowing or fingering a saxophone. Such practical limitations did not even have to be overcome in his music, they somehow never existed for him.”

In the early Sixties, Ornette started to organize and promote his own concerts, most notably the much-revered *Town Hall, 1962*, which showcased his new trio made up of David Izenzon on bass and Charles Moffett — his good friend from Texas growing

up — on drums along with a string ensemble. After the Town Hall concert, however, Ornette dropped off the scene for a few years. He didn’t record or play out, saying he was sick of being misunderstood. During this low-key period, he began to hone his self-taught skills on trumpet and violin, sat in with John Coltrane’s group, and composed music for the soundtrack of the short Robert Frank film *O.K. End Here*.

By 1965, Ornette was recording for Blue Note, by then the most influential jazz label of all time. He immediately released a stunning double-volume set of recordings (with Moffett and Izenzon) titled *At the “Golden Circle” Stockholm*.

The Ornette Coleman Trio returned to the studio in the spring of 1966. Charlie Haden was back on bass, but the group had a new drummer: 10-year-old Ornette Denardo Coleman, the only son from his broken marriage to poet Jayne Cortez. Once again, he had shocked the jazz community, this time by installing his next of kin behind the drum kit. Shelly Manne, who had played on some of Ornette’s first recordings, called Denardo’s playing “unadulterated shit.” The recording sessions became *The Empty Foxhole*, and Denardo would go on to play, on and off again, with his father for over 40 years. A short time later, Ornette returned to the trio who had performed at Town Hall, but this time Ornette permanently added Haden as well, providing a double-bass dynamic, which was unusual at the time, even as the experimental musical period of the late Sixties was approaching.<sup>3</sup>

As the Sixties came to a close, acoustic jazz became less popular as the music morphed into the jazz-rock fusion of the



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Denardo Coleman on drums

Seventies. Miles Davis, at this point, was leading the jazz-rock fusion revolution: From his 1969 albums *In a Silent Way* and *Bitches Brew* through his retirement in 1975, experimental electric jazz would remain popular the rest of the decade — and into the Eighties — with bands like Weather Report, the Mahavishnu Orchestra and Chick Corea's group, Return to Forever, paving the way for the dull sounds of "smooth jazz" and the repertory, quasi-classical movement that dominates commercial jazz music today.

But the Seventies ushered in additional breakthroughs in improvisation and composition for Ornette and his collaborators, including the *Science Fiction Sessions*, *Broken Shadows*, *Skies of America* (recorded with the London Philharmonic Orchestra), *Dancing in Your Head*, *Body Meta* and a duo record with Charlie Haden, *Soapsuds*, *Soapsuds*. By the middle of the decade, he had distanced himself from the term "free jazz," calling his theory of improvising music "harmolodics." Ornette also opened and successfully ran Artist's House, a venue on Prince Street in Soho where he also lived and practiced.

In 1982, Ornette purchased an old church on Rivington Street in the Lower East Side. His goal, he told Litweiler, was to create an "art embassy" for international musicians. He had by that time, formed what would be called Prime Time, his first all-electric band.

As of 2008, Ornette has been making records for over 50 years, and yet he very much still adheres to the same fundamental idea he explained to Nat Hentoff in an interview for the liner notes of his first album. "The creation of music," he said, "is just as natural as the air we breathe."

In the first half of 2007, Coleman received a Grammy lifetime achievement award and won a Pulitzer Prize for his 2006 album, *Sound Grammar*, recorded in Ludwigshafen, Germany — and released on his own record label of the same name. Regarding his two recent awards, the soft-spoken 77-year-old told me last summer that he "actually hadn't sat down to put it in its proper order." Sitting across from me with his legs crossed in his spacious but minimalist wood-floored loft apartment in a nondescript building in Manhattan's garment district, he elaborated, "The reason why I put a record out myself is because there wasn't anybody interested in recording me. I really do try to find a way to express music as best as I can in a creative way. Believe me, people have heard music and they've heard ideas, but when they hear something that actually has some effect upon how they feel, it's gotta mean something to

them. And you can't do that by playing your hits. I don't have any hits."

His assistant, Jose, who is from Spain and was working for him last summer, chimed in from across the half-empty room filled with African art, "You forgot about 'Lonely Woman.'" "I understand," Ornette said, "but my point is that if you have an actual interest in music, then you have to accept sound as your master."

**Ornette Coleman:** Do you play an instrument?

**Stop Smiling:** I don't.

**OC:** It's not because you can't. Believe me. Music is about the instinct and ideas you have to activate. It's like some form of invention. You don't just think of something. It's going to pop up.

**SS:** You were self-taught from the beginning?

**OC:** Totally. I'm not bragging, but I am.

**SS:** You got your first saxophone when you were 14 or so?

**OC:** It happened kinda like that. I thought it was just a toy. I picked it up and played it, and never put it down. And then I taught myself. I saw my mother going somewhere and I told her, "I want one of those." She said, "Okay, you find a way to work and make money and save your money, you can buy one." So I'd go every day and bring the money I'd made back to my mother. And after two or three years, she told me one day to look under the bed, and there was a saxophone. I took it out and played it. I hate to say this, but I was about as good as I play now. I didn't know you had to learn music. I was just able to manipulate the mechanical parts.

**SS:** Was Charlie Parker your earliest musical hero?

**OC:** He was one, but there were some people in my hometown of Fort Worth that I admired very much. I was born there. It had a great music scene for all different kinds of music.

**SS:** Jazz, rhythm and blues?

**OC:** All of it: jazz, gospel and rhythm and blues. But it wasn't until I first went to New York that I really started composing music. Everybody was playing their own music and I was learning theirs. Finally, I said, "That's good, but there's gotta be more to it." So I started finding a way that I could put my ideas down





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on paper. One of the things I always enjoyed about music is that the sound was always free enough to allow you to express that concept with more than just one instrument. I picked up the trumpet, the sax and the violin. They all have the same notes, they just sound different. When I was growing up, bebop music was just coming to the surface. There were many good saxophone players I admired. But I had some family living in New York City. My sister brought me to New York to meet them. It was then that I really became aware of music — when I was exposed to how music was played in New York. When I got back to Fort Worth — we call it Cow Town — I began to play out.

**SS:** Why is Fort Worth called Cow Town?

**OC:** It's a city where all the packinghouses are. When I was living

in Fort Worth, I could see all the cattle going to be slaughtered and turned into steaks. I grew up and finally I had saved enough money and got my horn and started playing it. All of a sudden I got an offer to be in a band in a nightclub for live performances. I just kept on. Bebop music was getting very popular when I got my horn, and I thought Charlie Parker was unbelievable. I started learning that music first — any music that had an improvised outlet. I started learning the melodies. Then I taught myself how to write music and finally one day I decided that now that I have found all of these melodies, I'm going to see how many different kinds of music I can learn: blues, classical, rock 'n' roll, funk — they are all played by the same notes, it just has a different idea behind the notes. So after I went through that, I got a band and I got sharp. When I got to New York City, I started hearing, more clearly, all the different styles of music: classical music, funk, rhythm and blues, rock, country and western. I just decided to learn all the styles I could. Then I realized I didn't have any of my own. So then I started analyzing how I could do that. I finally taught myself how to compose music. I had a cousin that was married to Doc Cheatham, the trumpet player. I came to New York with her.

**SS:** This is before you moved to Los Angeles?

**OC:** Yeah. Before I moved to Los Angeles. I really had lots of inspiration when I first came to New York as a visitor. I was just in awe of what I found: There were so many creative people doing what they liked. In Fort Worth, there was still segregation. Yet many bands did come to Fort Worth. I played with so many different bands: white, black, all kinds. That experience really made me want to study music more because I was exposed to so much improvised music. I really like music of all kinds, but the improvised music was really the most sensational for me. I remember seeing Charlie Parker when I first went to California. I said, "Oh, my goodness." I was playing — and could always repeat things very quickly — but I hadn't thought about being a composer. Finally one day I started teaching myself the theories of improvising. As I caught on, I got better and better. I went to California and got an offer to make a record.

## ESSENTIAL ORNETTE COLEMAN RECORDINGS

### **Something Else!!!! The Music of Ornette Coleman** (Contemporary) 1958

Ornette Coleman — alto sax  
Don Cherry — trumpet  
Walter Norris — piano  
Don Payne — bass  
Billy Higgins — drums

### **The Shape of Jazz to Come** (Atlantic) 1959

Ornette Coleman — alto sax  
Don Cherry — cornet  
Charlie Haden — bass  
Billy Higgins — drums

### **Free Jazz** (Atlantic) 1960

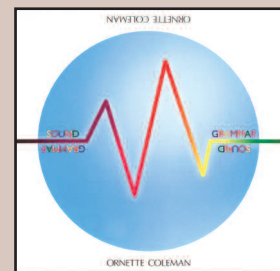
Ornette Coleman — alto sax  
Don Cherry — pocket trumpet  
Scott La Faro — bass  
Billy Higgins — bass  
Eric Dolphy — bass clarinet  
Charlie Haden — bass  
Ed Blackwell — drums

### **Town Hall 1962** (ESP-DISK) 1962

Ornette Coleman — alto sax  
David Izenzon — bass  
Charles Moffett — percussion  
Selwart Clark — violin  
Nathan Goldstein — violin  
Julian Barber — viola  
Kermit Moore — cello

### **Sound Grammar** (Sound Grammar) 2006

Ornette Coleman — sax, violin and trumpet  
Denardo Coleman — drums and percussion  
Gregory Cohen — bass  
Tony Falanga — bass





**SS:** Would you say you consider yourself more of a composer than a jazz musician?

**OC:** I think being a jazz musician is a privilege and being a composer is a title. If you're playing improvised music you find so many different kinds of ideas and environments. Most classical music fans get as much pleasure from reading classical music as they do from hearing it, because there are lots of composers that write the ideas down. When you're a jazz musician, it's more about improvised ideas. The word *jazz* basically is a freedom of expression that has no prejudice for race, creed or color, which is very healthy.

Imagine making music without anyone influencing you on how to do it, and you do it yourself. It's gotta be much more enjoyable and more interesting. There's nothing wrong with imitating something you like. It might make the person feel good, but does it make them think you're trying to do something that you don't know? But when you're playing an idea, it has no agenda, which is really good.

**SS:** Was it completely trial and error when you picked up, for instance, the violin or the trumpet?

**OC:** Yeah. Your emotion has the color of ideas. It's not a big problem when you make mistakes. And never be embarrassed about sounding bad — it's creative. You might discover some idea no one had ever thought about. Nine out of 10, you will.

**SS:** You certainly did on a number of occasions.

**OC:** That's right. I'm a good example of that. I grew up with some incredible musicians around, especially Charlie Parker. What's really fantastic about this country — imagine how many different races make up America. If you do that, you can imagine what the music must be like. It must be incredible, and it is. It's the heart and soul and the mind.

**SS:** Your son, Denardo, has been playing with you for what, 40 years now?

**OC:** Since he was a kid. I didn't force him to become a musician. It was something he wanted to do on his own. He does it very well. He's very good. I've been encouraging him since they cut the umbilical cord to go wherever he wants to go.

**SS:** Did he pretty much teach himself as well?

**OC:** I'm sure.

**SS:** Have you always lived by the belief of melding music and ideas and life and religion into one?

**OC:** It's one expression, and it's true. The human being is all that is. Everything involved with being a human being comes from something spiritual. Let's face it; the word *god* represents human beings, not animals. It's amazing how human beings became in favor of God. That's good in and of itself that human beings were able to be born and live in a certain way, where that quality became known and people came looking for it and living for it — the awareness of being alive. It's not evil — it's good. Every human being has something they do that someone else is not thinking about, but eventually it becomes something that someone cares about. Every human being is prone to grow like that, whether you want to call him an inventor, or a doctor, whatever. I don't know who wrote the Bible, but it was a good start. We're not the worst species in the world. If there were no human beings, we'd be in trouble. That's what's so amazing about life. Humans have been given the privilege to think and to make those ideas materialize — musical or otherwise. That's why humans invent things. It comes from someone's idea. And the thing about it is that it's not something that's in anyone's control.

**SS:** You said recently that your theory of harmolodics removes the caste system from the sound.

**OC:** Basically, if you take a two- or five-year-old, or a 30-year-old, and they play an idea, anyone can challenge that idea if they hear something different. You can't say, "Well, don't do it." That is what is so immortal about being human. The only reason human beings exist is to glorify the eternity of their being. Who is against that? God doesn't have anything against it. People don't. Sometimes human beings talk like they've been in heaven. I don't know if heaven is a place that you can live before you die, but maybe it is. If it is, that ain't bad. Maybe. But imagine if you didn't have to die to go to heaven. That would be even better.

**SS:** For the most part, you've almost always played and recorded your own compositions. Why?

**OC:** Because I thought if I could do the standards as good as someone else had done them, they wouldn't help me to think of different ideas. It would just be repeating that. I didn't want to grow having to start from something someone else was already doing. I'm not paying the person that's doing that. I have to do what he does. I started analyzing music and I finally found out how to do it. I'm still trying to perfect it. Sound, you



see, doesn't have any grammar. Sound is either there or it's not. What I mean by sound is the idea. You have to experience the idea in your life.

**SS:** *Sound Grammar* is the name of your most recent record. It's also the name of the record label you formed not too long ago. But it's beyond a simple phrase to you. Is it a way of thinking about music?

**OC:** Well, what is so amazing is that all of language is spoken because of some kind of grammar. But we're talking about sound.

**SS:** Whether it's language or music or noises — is that what you mean?

**OC:** Exactly. It's sound. If someone can analyze that: If you can sell this person the same disc from an interpretation, that's pretty good. Since grammar is the logic of adjectives, nouns and pronouns — what category does that fall into? Those are the qualities that give knowledge the provision of making knowledge out of sound. What is it called? Intelligence, I guess. In order to know what an adjective or an adverb is, you have to discipline the meaning of sound the same way you pronounce words. But what is sound? Is there anything else that works like that? Only love, perhaps. I don't know. When we look out, we see space, only because we are vertical, looking up. But we are in the sky.

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#### FOOTNOTES

<sup>1</sup> "Embraceable You" is the only pop standard to appear on any Ornette Coleman solo record (*This Is Our Music*), though he did record Monk's blues standard "Misterioso" for the soundtrack to David Cronenberg's *Naked Lunch* in 1987.



<sup>2</sup> In 1967, for only the second time in his career, Ornette played a date as a sideman on Jackie McLean's Blue Note album *New and Old Gospel*, playing trumpet instead of tenor or alto sax; yet one side of the LP includes two of Ornette's compositions. Later that same year, after John Coltrane's untimely death, Ornette started recording with two of Coltrane's sidemen from his classic quartet: Elvin Jones and Jimmy Garrison. Dewey Redman completed the new quartet, resulting in two albums (both on Blue Note) released in 1968: *Love Call* and *New York Is Now!*



<sup>3</sup> "He's never explained his term 'harmolodics' where you can know what he means," Ira Gitler, the veteran jazz writer and historian, recently told me. "He's a primitive. Some of his songs are great, but as he's progressed, he gets away with murder with the critics. Anybody else who did this kind of a jazz-rock combination would get slaughtered by the critics, but not Ornette. He is like the golden boy."